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DISARMAMENT FACT SHEETS

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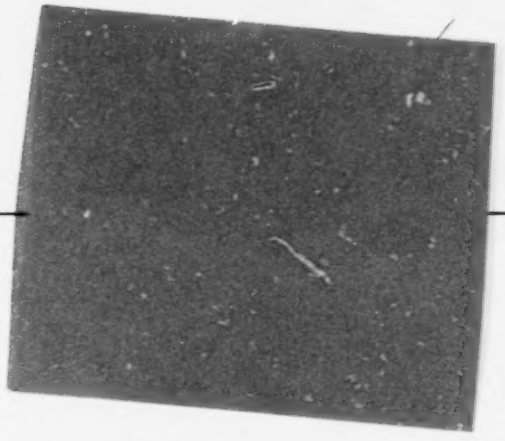

Fact Sheet No. 7 DPI/659

CHEMICAL WEAPONS

The conclusion of a convention to prohibit the development, production and stockpiling of all chemical weapons is "one of the most urgent tasks of multilateral negotiations", the General Assembly declared at its 1978 special session devoted to disarmament.

Chemical Weapons in World War I: Chemical weapons were used in World War I. According to official reports gas casualties numbered about 1,300,000, of which about 100,000 were fatal. The agents used were much less toxic than those which could be used today (such as nerve agents).

The rapid scientific and technological advances in the past few decades have increased the potential of these chemical agents to such an extent that they could cause far more casualties than conventional warfare.

Types of Chemical Agents: Nerve agents are colourless, odourless, tasteless chemicals of the same family as organophosphorous insecticides. They poison the nervous system, disrupt vital body functions, and kill quickly. Blister agents, which caused many of the chemical weapon casualties of World War I, are oily liquids which burn and blister the skin and also have general toxic effects. Choking agents irritate and severely injure the lungs, and blood agents produce death by interfering with utilization of oxygen by the tissues.

Tear and harassing gases are sensory irritants which cause temporary flow of tears, skin and respiratory irritation, and occasionally nausea and vomiting; they are widely used as riot-control agents as well as in war. Psycho-chemicals are intended to cause temporary mental disturbances. Herbicides poison or dessicate the leaves of plants, causing them to lose their leaves or die. Some are also toxic for man and animals.

Expert Report: A UN expert group on chemical and biological weapons, reporting in 1969, said: "Were these weapons ever to be used on a large scale in war, no one could predict how enduring the effects would be and how they would affect the structure of society and the environment in which we live. This overriding danger would apply as much to the country which initiated the use of these weapons as to the one which had been attacked".

Any country could develop a capability in this type of warfare, the expert group said. "The momentum of the arms race would clearly decrease if the production of these weapons were effectively and unconditionally banned".

Geneva Protocol: International outrage over the use of toxic gases in World War I led to agreement on the prohibition of the use of chemical and bacteriological weapons in the Geneva Protocol of 1925.

The Geneva Protocol prohibits "the use in war of asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases, and of all analogous liquids, materials, or devices", as well as "the use of bacteriological methods of warfare". The Protocol did not prohibit development, production or stockpiling of such weapons.

In 1969 the General Assembly declared as contrary to the generally recognized rules of international law, as embodied in the Protocol, the use in international armed conflict of (a) any chemical agents of warfare -- chemical substances, whether gaseous, liquid or solid -- which might be employed because of their direct toxic effects on man, animals or plants; and (b) any biological agents of warfare -- living organisms, whatever their nature, or infective material derived from them -- which were intended to cause disease or death in man, animals or plants, and which depended for their effects on their ability to multiply in the person, animal or plant attacked.

Prohibition of Biological Weapons: In the 1950s and 1960s, the question of chemical warfare was usually discussed in conjunction with biological weapons. Proposals were made for a single convention to outlaw both types of weapons.

Eventually it was agreed that a convention on biological weapons could be agreed upon without waiting any longer for solution of the more difficult problems concerning chemical weapons. The Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) Weapons and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction was opened for signature in 1972. It entered into force in 1975, and by the end of 1978 had been ratified by 80 countries.

Parties to the Convention undertake never to develop, produce, stockpile or otherwise acquire (1) biological agents or toxins that have no justification for peaceful purposes and (2) weapons, equipment or means of delivery designed to use such agents or toxins for hostile purposes or in armed conflict.

Each State Party also agreed to destroy or divert to peaceful purposes all of the agents, toxins, weapons, equipment and means of delivery covered by the Convention. It was the first multilateral agreement providing for destruction of weapon stocks.

A conference to review the implementation of the convention will be held in Geneva in March 1980.

Priority Goal: Following the agreement on a separate convention outlawing biological weapons, the Assembly has continued to urge that a ban on chemical weapons be negotiated as a priority matter. A number of proposals, including draft conventions, have been submitted and discussed, but no agreement has been reached so far.

Issues: Discussions on a chemical weapons convention have centred on such questions as the scope of prohibitions, how to determine whether a chemical substance could be considered a chemical warfare agent, whether a convention should seek a comprehensive ban or a step-by-step approach beginning with the most lethal agents, and how to verify compliance with prohibitions and with requirements for destruction of stockpiles.

Various criteria have been suggested to specify activities and substances that might be prohibited. One criterion is that of purpose or intention: a lethal chemical agent having no peaceful use would be banned. Production of a substance in quantity could indicate a non-peaceful purpose and form a criterion for a ban. Other criteria suggested concern the degree of verifiability, types of effects or chemical properties.

One problem lies in the fact that many chemical substances with peaceful applications may also have a potential use as a warfare agent. An example is phosgene, manufactured in quantity for use in making herbicides and insecticides, plastics and pharmaceuticals. Another complicating factor is the existence of binary chemical weapons -- in which the combination of separate, relatively non-toxic chemical components may produce a toxic compound.

US-USSR Negotiations: A joint US-USSR communique in 1974 announced their agreement to consider a joint initiative "with respect to the conclusion, as a first step, of an international convention dealing with the most dangerous, lethal means of chemical warfare". Bilateral negotiations were initiated in 1976. In July 1979 the two countries reported to the Committee on Disarmament on the progress of their talks. They had agreed that:

- A convention should prohibit development, production and stockpiling of super-toxic lethal chemicals, other lethal or highly toxic chemicals or their precursors, and chemical munitions or other means of chemical warfare.

- The only exceptions would be chemicals intended for permitted purposes and of such types and in such quantities as were appropriate to those purposes. (Permitted purposes were understood to include industrial, research or medical uses, law enforcement, and development and testing of protection against chemical weapons).

- Parties to the convention would be required to declare their stocks of chemical warfare agents covered by its provisions, and would have to destroy their stockpiles or divert them for permitted purposes within 10 years after ratifying the convention.

- Adequate verification was necessary and should be based on a combination of national and international measures. Procedures for requesting on-site investigation would be included.

The US-USSR negotiations were continuing on issues not resolved.

General Assembly's Aim: The General Assembly said in 1978 that a chemical weapons agreement "should meet the objective of complete, effective and verifiable prohibition of the development, production and stockpiling of chemical weapons, as well as providing adequate methods of verification for the destruction of the stockpiles".

The Committee on Disarmament was asked to undertake negotiations on such a treaty or convention "as a matter of high priority". Some CD members have said the Committee should proceed with its own work on a chemical weapons convention even while the bilateral effort continued.

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October 1979.